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ABSTRACT

Playfulness as a quality of play in young children is seen as related to competence, and as such can be encouraged by making children aware of what they are capable of doing. Guidelines and examples of fostering playfulness in children are spelled out for caretakers. Reference is also made to studies indicating that playfulness is related to the creativity dimensions of ideational fluency (rapid production of many ideas), spontaneous flexibility, and originality in young children. (Author/RH) (Author/RH)

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FOSTERING PLAYFULNESS IN THE PLAY OF THE YOUNG CHILD

Address to the YWCA Conference on Play
Oct. 21, 1978; New Haven CT

J. Nina Lieberman

As we usher in the International Year of the Child, it is most appropriate to focus on what has been called the predominant mode of behavior in young children--play. But while play is universal, it is also amorphous--hard to pinpoint at times and difficult to define.

What is Play?

How often do we say to children: "Can't you see I'm busy, you go and play." Now put yourself in the child's place. Could it mean to the little boy and girl that you have important things to do and that he or she should not bother you, and just fill the time with play. But to a child, play is an all-important activity and we need to watch out that we do not talk it down. As a matter of fact, we need to do more than just not talk it down. We have to make it the worthwhile activity that it can be in helping children learn about themselves and their environment. Therefore, one of the answers to the question "What is Play?" is that it is an activity or time that allows the child to learn while having fun doing so.

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What is Playfulness in the Play of the Young Child?

When you look at a boy or girl playing, have you noticed that not all children play the same way? That is, one child may hop and skip, laugh, sing, show a "glint-in-the-eye" when he or she teases another child, may move quite easily from a group building with blocks to a group looking after animals, and very often have some new and good ideas in painting, dress-up play, or building.

In my own investigations into the play behavior of young children, I called this a child's style of play and labeled it playfulness. In kindergarten-age children, playfulness was made up of three major dimensions, namely, spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor. Behaviorally, spontaneity was expressed in an ease of movement in the physical sense; a fluidity in relationships in the social area, and a re-arrangement of materials and/or ideas in the cognitive realm. Manifest joy could be observed in repetition of behavior, accompanied by a chuckle or singing as well as of explicit verbal expressions such as "I like it," or "This is fun." Sense of humor was the most difficult of the traits to identify, but rhyming, gentle teasing, some attempts at punning as well as seeing a situation as funny were found to be part of the kindergartner's humor.

I had two reasons for concentrating on playfulness in play. One was that it narrowed the focus in what we already called an amorphous type of activity, and thus provided a manageable tool to identify quality of play. The other reason was that

the playful approach to problems was noted as one of the characteristics of creative individuals. The obvious question to ask, therefore, was: does playfulness show itself in the play of young children and is it related to creativity or divergent thinking already at this young age?

My own studies with middle-class children and a replication with Mexican-American children did indeed show positive correlations between the behavior dimension of playfulness and divergent thinking tasks tapping ideational fluency, spontaneous flexibility and originality. In other words, the boy or girl who was perceived as more playful also produced more ideas on "Things to Eat," and "Toys to Play With" (ideational fluency), shifted categories more readily within both lists of things to eat and toys to play with (spontaneous flexibility), and came up with more unique titles to stories about a frog and a squirrel that was read to them (originality).

WHY Should We Encourage Playfulness in the Young Child?

We looked at play and found it to be an all-encompassing activity of the child. In Piaget's words, "It enters into every activity of the child." We decided not to get "hung up" over a definition of play. At the same time we acknowledge the importance of play, and because of that we zeroed in on its quintessence, which we found to be playfulness. We know it can be identified. We know that some children are more playful than others. We also know that playfulness relates to creativity in the young child.

All these facts should allow us to make a good case for encouraging playfulness in young children. But there is more. In a further review of my own work and that of other researchers, I have been able to connect playfulness with the familiar and known, and exploration with the novel and unknown. This brings me to the assertion that the playful individual at any age level is the competent individual.

Let us now consider the ramification of this assertion for the play of the young child. A playful youngster will show spontaneity by building on existing knowledge, show joy over being able to handle what he or she knows, and a gentleness in the humor which is an index of the security the child feels.

In a sense, therefore, we are departing from the usual dichotomy between work and play. By putting the emphasis on competence, we establish a solid link between child's play on the one hand and the more structured learning situation or the work of the classroom. Thus, knowing what you can do and feeling good about what you can do are the foundation for playfulness as expressed in spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor. Even a young child can learn that it is important to be competent. In an older individual, we would say it is appropriate to take your work seriously but not yourself. It is well to keep this in mind for it takes a playful adult to encourage playfulness in the child.

HOW Can We Encourage Playfulness in the Young Child?

Before giving guidelines, let us consider some concrete situations involving the play of preschoolers.

Four-year-old Johnny is building a tower with blocks. He is so intent, he frowns, his tongue is sticking out. It's his first try with these new blocks. It is not as straight as he would like it to be, and he wants it higher. He puts one more block on the pile, and the whole tower collapses. He looks around, somewhat sheepish, and wonders whether he should try again.

This is where you can help. It may not even be through something you do. It may be through just being what you are. A smile, a friendly pat on the head may be all that is needed to get him started on another try. He will be more skilled at it now, more at ease, more competent. A chuckle will replace the frown. The notion will take hold: I'm able to do it and it's fun doing it.

Let's now look at a group of boys and girls. They're in the housekeeping corner. They've set themselves up as father, mother, son, and daughter. Another boy comes up. He wants to join. They're not too keen about it.

At this point, you might say, "What about a grandfather?" You have helped in thinking of something else. If the group does not like your idea, don't push it on them. Then it's

time to work with the boy who wanted to join them and make him see other things he could do. Again, what you are trying to encourage is freedom and ease of movement in body and mind.

Let's take another example.

> Here is five-year-old Susan busy with her paints. Her people are larger than life. Her houses are small. Her trees purple. She is singing while she's painting, and at times steps back to smilingly contemplate her work.

How can you help? Sometimes we help by not doing something we would have liked to do: like making a remark about the size of the houses, or the color of the trees. Accepting what she has put on the paper will reinforce her sense of competence and will enhance the enjoyment she's getting out of what she's doing.

You may well be tempted to say: "I've heard all this before," and that is all to the good because you, too, as caretakers and guides of young children need to become familiar with what you know; then you can look at the familiar within a new frame of reference and become playful yourself.

If we now want to spell out more specifically how we can encourage playfulness in the play of young children, I would like to suggest the following guidelines:

As a caretaker of young children, you need

1. to have a baseline knowledge of child development so that you are familiar with the competencies you may

expect a 3-, 4-, or 5-year-old to possess;

2. to have a commitment to an unfolding of these competencies in a play setting;
3. to be comfortable about having fun yourself (i.e., being playful yourself), and allowing the child to have fun.

As an illustration of how this might work in a nursery school setting, let me quote the example I used in my book:

> It is story time. The teacher asks whether anyone wants to have their favorite story read. Susan pipes up and makes her choice known. A chorus of voices saying: Yes, yes, let's have the story of the little red locomotive. Rapt attention as the now familiar story unravels.--But, lo and behold, the teacher changes the ending. Groans of disappointment. "No, no. That's not right. The little red locomotive is not going to the museum. It's going to run again and the children will use it." When the story is read with its expected ending, general expressions of glee and delight.

Should we fault the teacher for trying a different ending, for introducing change and encouraging flexibility in her young audience? By no means. What it indicates is that the teacher needs to be responsive to the cues from the children. If, at this point, they are not ready for the exploratory phase in their thinking, it may tell her that they need more preparation. Or, better still, the children themselves may

want to try their hand at different endings. This might generate another dimension of joy--that of recombining the familiar with the new. A playful teacher may also be willing to accept the usefulness of going over the familiar and possibly see new overtones in what seemed the same situation. Thus, the search for the new might, at times, be alternated with the comfortable feeling of the known. In other words, establishing a playful frame of mind or action creates the climate for the creative product.

When Encouraging Playfulness, What Do We Need To Watch Out For?

When is playfulness not playfulness? At the time when I established my criteria for the Playfulness Rating Scales for kindergartners, I had occasion to work with a group of emotionally disturbed children. This experience pointed up the major differences between playfulness and nonplayfulness in young children. Instead of spontaneity, or ease of movement, you had restless and aimless darting about; instead of manifest joy, you had whining and whimpering; instead of sense of humor, you saw "besting" and mean teasing.

In an average group of children, the differences may not be as clear-cut, and we have to allow for some nonplayful behavior even in a playful child. The key element to look for is consistency--is the child more often playful than nonplayful? If nonplayful, how can we build up his or her competencies so that the playful dimension becomes dominant in his/her behavior?

Fitting Playfulness into the Wider Framework of Prosocial Behavior

As we are entering the International Year of the Child, it is appropriate to set our sights beyond this one year, 1979. We need to keep in mind the fact that the children of today are going to live the better part of their lives in the 21st century. As an educator and psychologist, I am, therefore, heartened by the fact that there has been increasing interest in studying helping behavior, such as altruism and generosity, in young children.

It is my contention that playfulness contributes to the development of prosocial behavior. A child who is comfortable with what he knows is more likely to aid another one. Thus playfulness in play carries over into the more structured learning of the group within the classroom. What it leads up to ultimately is that playfulness as a quality of play becomes a personality trait of the player and an integral part of the individual's approach to life in general.

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